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Main Article:

The Frustrations of Reader Generalizability and Grounded Theory: Alternative Considerations for Transferability

Thomas Misco
Department of Teacher Education, Miami University, 301A McGuffey Hall, Oxford, OH 45056, USA
miscotj@muohio.edu

Abstract

In this paper I convey a recurring problem and possible solution that arose during my doctoral research on the topic of cross-cultural Holocaust curriculum development for Latvian schools. Specifically, as I devised the methodology for my research, I experienced a number of frustrations concerning the issue of transferability and the limitations of both reader generalizability and grounded theory. Ultimately, I found a more appropriate goal for the external applicability of this and other highly contextual research studies in the form of "grounded understandings," which are tentative apprehensions of the importance or significance of phenomena and conceptualizations that hold meaning and explanatory power, but are only embryonic in their potential to generate theory.

Keywords: reader generalizability; transferability; grounded theory; Holocaust education; grounded understandings

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Prior to entering doctoral study, I used to associate "research" with hard, durable, and verifiable findings that would certainly include some degree of error, but were, on the whole, a snapshot of reality. The idea of conducting qualitative research was not entirely new to me; as a high school teacher I guided students' social science research projects

and I conducted field work in Japan. I had always found limitations with positivism and my epistemological upbringing was more closely associated with the Heraclitan assertion that we cannot step into the same river twice, for no two people, contexts, places, or times are exactly alike. This was then the major hurdle to understanding research that I failed to realize during my first year of doctoral study: the seemingly incompatible combination of qualitative concepts, such as intention, history, meaning, and multiple realities, on the one hand, and the expression of the unique and singular into generative knowledge on the other. Qualitative research might help me mine an interpretive epistemological paradigm, but to what end? Would the outcome of my research be limited in terms of generalizability? Would the possibility that readers might inhabit a "different interpretive space" dictate the relevance of my work (A. Dipardo, personal communication, October 1, 2003)?

These questions persisted throughout my first semester of the doctoral program and into the subsequent years. After conducting a qualitative study on Kyrgyz educators' views of moral education during my first qualitative research course, my write-up included text that anticipated future complications:

> I question the extent to which reader generalizability might be attained . . . Erickson's (1986) suggestion that interpretive research seeks "concrete universals" that can be compared to other specific cases suggests a sense of induction that is not "true," but rather one that approaches verisimilitude. Only through the examination of multiple case studies on the Kyrgyz experience might we approach a level of confidence in our knowledge that would be suggestive of a *knowing* about this particular reality. Thus, while other studies of Kyrgyz moral education may or may not resonate with this study, their sum total has the potential to constitute coherence with reality.

Reading this paragraph years later, in 2005, I detected strong currents of skepticism surrounding the issue of transferability and generalizability. As an isolated study, I questioned its external value as well as the study's ability to inform others with the exception, perhaps, of some sort of qualitative meta-analysis. Moreover, I found my uncertainties concerning transferability were also having a corrosive effect on my confidence with the study's credibility. Ultimately, when I began work on my dissertation research the following year, the thought of external validity, generalizability, or transferability in qualitative work (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) still posed a challenge.

1. Continued Frustrations With Transferability

Before entering doctoral school I had established a single goal concerning the dissertation: it must have importance. I was quite fearful of taking up a narrow or irrelevant research agenda that would culminate in a perfunctory degree and I imagined the thesis sitting on a library shelf, unopened, year after year. In short, I wanted to pick a topic that was meaningful and relevant. These concerns were largely assuaged when I arrived at my topic early in 2004: Holocaust curriculum development for the Republic of Latvia.

The Nazi occupation of Latvia during World War II resulted in a series of horrific events for thousands of Jews and persons belonging to minority communities in Latvia. During this time, many Latvians made an array of choices in response to this occupation, including some Latvians choosing to collaborate with the Nazis, while others engaged in the rescue of Jews. The great majority chose to acquiesce and act as bystanders. But following the Soviet reoccupation of Latvia in 1945, Latvian schools rarely addressed the topic of the Holocaust with any depth or analytical integrity. After Latvia regained independence in 1991, teaching about the Holocaust as it occurred in Latvia remained a rarity due to a number of factors, including the unwillingness of many teachers to address this sensitive topic, a fear of offending the large number of living bystanders and collaborators, a lack of governmental encouragement, and a highly congested public school curriculum. Consequently, Latvia's minimal curricular devotion to the Holocaust and Latvia's involvement in it (Latvian Ministry of Education, 2004) posed the central problem of my dissertation.

The primary purposes of my study were to explore the influences on Holocaust instruction in Latvia, how a curriculum project responded to these historical, cultural, and political influences, and how a team of Latvian curriculum writers deliberated, negotiated, and decided what materials should constitute their new Holocaust curriculum in the light of Latvian social realities and the dynamics of the curriculum project. Within this primary purpose, the study also analyzed the influences that various stakeholders had on the curriculum writers. The study covered the entire length of the curriculum project, from its inception to culmination, using the curriculum writers' experiences as its main source of data.

I hoped that as a result of this study, other curriculum writers, administrators, policy makers, educational researchers, and educational professionals could build an understanding of the *process* of cross-cultural curriculum deliberation and decision-making when designing and constructing curricula. Understanding this process would ultimately advance our knowledge of how institutions, cultures, and individuals influence the process of creating a curriculum product.

I believed that the study held significance for cultures and societies dealing with silenced histories and suppressed controversies, including other former Soviet republics grappling with Holocaust education issues. I also thought that understanding the process of cross-cultural group deliberation in designing and constructing curricula responsive to controversial topics should prove to be beneficial for educators and curriculum developers. As Latvia continues to develop its new democratic way of life after centuries of occupation, decisions are constantly made about the Latvian narrative and which historical and civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions are most worthy of privilege in the school experience. Given the beneficial collateral effects of addressing suppressed issues, controversial topics, and Holocaust history, any efforts aimed at advancing these issues in any society, including Latvia, demanded the attention of social studies educators and educational researchers.

1.1. Reader Generalizability

My persistent epistemological questions tempered the excitement associated with finding an exciting and potentially important topic. By this time I had taken additional research courses and I was well aware that qualitative research is notoriously weak in terms of transferability (McMillan, 2004) due to a widely held view that it is "unimportant, unachievable, or both" (Schofield, 1990, p. 202). There seemed to be three basic options for transferability: (a) sample to population, (b) analytic, and (c) case-to-case transfer (Firestone, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Alternatively, some have suggested that a way out of this epistemic quandary is to claim user or *reader generalizability* whereby the argument or findings are applicable in different, unique, and specific contexts (Merriam, 2001; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998), while others have advanced the idea of considering studies of this kind as vehicles for others to understand present experiences through a different lens (Eisner, 1998). Transferability, in this sense, could arise through readers finding relevant patterns in my study that help explain their experiences as they wade through whatever rich and thick description I could offer (Merriam, 2001). But claiming "reader generalizability" seemed a bit underwhelming and random, given the importance I had felt the study had for other societies and cultures grappling with controversies closed to conversation and the renegotiation of contested historical narratives. In this sense, transferability seemed rather limiting and haphazard.

First of all, would anyone read my dissertation or articles produced from it? Moreover, would anyone from a society or culture grappling with some suppressed controversy read it? I had read Patton's (1990) reference to Guba and Lincoln's (1981) criticism of generalizability where they suggested that we can only generalize if we are free from context. But context was more than just one consideration in my study--it *defined* the study given the sociocultural nature of Latvia's curricular problem. As LeCompte and Schensul (1999) indicated, the minimal conditions for using ethnographic research include a concern for using cultural concepts to guide the research and to help explain or interpret data, as well as realizing that human behavior and the way people construct meaning is a local affair. So when are we ever free from context? Palonsky (1987) had addressed this issue earlier, noting that "if the goal of an academic field is to develop a set of general laws that can be applied to all cases at all times, ethnography is not the answer" (p. 82). I was certainly not ambitious enough to reach for "all cases at all times," but the quest of informing unknown readers was equally troubling. At this point I started to look for other options, and I thought that I found a promising one in *grounded theory*.

1.2. Grounded Theory

Grounded theory seemed somewhat more substantive, rigorous, and capable of applying the abstractions of my study as guidance for researchers in somewhat different situations (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). After reading Glaser and Strauss (1967), I became a bit more hopeful as I realized the potential for discovering "underlying uniformities" in the set of categories arising in my research that could "formulate the theory with a smaller set of higher level concepts" (p. 110). This was precisely what I was after--generating theory that could be applied to curriculum projects dealing with controversial histories. The

issue of context was therefore solved through abstraction because I was able to disentangle the underlying form of this research study and apply the resultant theories to other countries that experienced the Holocaust and Soviet occupation. Moreover, these theories could find applicability within societies and projects trying to address controversial areas in ways sensitive towards and inclusive of a wide variety of stakeholders. All I needed to do, it seemed, was follow the advice of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and present data as evidence for warranted conclusions while indicating explicitly how the generated theory was drawn from the data.

Throughout the research process, however, while deciding on the topic, arriving at an appropriate theoretical framework, and choosing from methodologies that would help answer my research questions, I was struck by the intensely *non-theoretical* nature of ethnography, curriculum deliberation, and Holocaust education, all of which resided at the core of my study. For example, curriculum deliberation eschews theory in favor of the nuanced particularities of unique curricular problems. Ethnography essentially does the same thing, whereby researchers try to engage with cultures without imposing a priori notions about culture. In short, my framework was decidedly non-theoretical. Due to the unique nature of each practical problem, such as Holocaust education in Latvia, no general principle or theory is capable of replacing the necessary weighing and judging of competing facts, values, and interests that might contribute to a resolution. Applying general theoretical notions to practical curriculum problems can potentially ignore local circumstances and experiences. Harris (1986) suggested that theories for curriculum work are instructive, for they tell us what or how to teach, but that they are misguided given their necessary distortion of particularities embedded in places, people, time, and circumstances. Because theory is an abstraction, it omits the character and nuance of the particulars that inform the problem.

Theories are also narrow. Theories of education and curriculum tend to rely on a single view of reality, but education and curriculum contain a variety of views arising from contextual particularities. Schwab (1970) noted that practical problems have no room for universally applied guides or rules. Instead, practical problems require an inductively oriented perception in order to bring into relief the facts of the case most relevant for resolution and subsequent action. Rather than seeing what we are trained to see, the resolution of practical problems requires an open-minded approach to an array of competing data and different formulations of the problem. Schwab (1971) referred to this intellectual agility as “polyfocal conspectus” (p. 356), which is the ability to approach a problem from multiple frames of reference. Because no theory or person can cast a complete understanding on the problem, numerous people and perspectives are required to sift through data, experiences, and ideas in order to determine that which may be most relevant and helpful.

Because practical problems are never definitively solved, they require reflective, eclectic, emergent, and non-linear approaches to create possible resolutions. As a result, although the process of reflection and deliberation is transferable to any practical problem, the particular content informing unique problems is not (McCutcheon, 1995). Practical problems and their tentative solutions are situational and context bound, which results in

a limited durability and transferability of insight. These sorts of problem are "indefinitely susceptible to circumstance, and therefore highly liable to unexpected change" (Schwab, 1970, p. 289), which calls for fresh rethinking for each new problem.

Given the constraints embedded within the context of my study, how could I generate any sort of theory? To what extent would abstraction and theory construction be overreaching and commit the egregious error of unreasonable implications or conclusions (Wolcott, 1994)? Corbin and Strauss (1990) suggested that grounded theory is interested in how actors respond to changing conditions and the "consequences of their actions," (p. 5) which I could certainly do, but I questioned how this would result in theory construction. In addition, Corbin and Strauss (1990) presented a clear warning to qualitative researchers: the procedures and canons of grounded theory must be taken seriously. If not, one might claim to have used grounded theory when, in reality, they only used some procedures and/or used them incorrectly. Yet, in virtually every way, my study followed their suggestions for grounded theory. For example, data collection and analysis were interrelated processes; I used concepts rather than instances as the unit of analysis; constructed categories that were related; analyzed broader structural conditions, including cultural values, political trends, and economic conditions; and adhered to the necessary requirements of transferability by providing explicit methods, procedures, sequence, description, conclusions linked to displayed data, a clear audit trail, a full articulation of my role as researcher, and also provided possible alternative conclusions which were mutually challenging (Miles & Huberman, 1994). What then was the problem? I was able to argue convincingly that I had used the grounded theory approach; but I still felt unsure about the transferability of my results.

When addressing the generalizability of a grounded theory, Corbin and Strauss (1990) made a number of cogent remarks that eventually dissolved my hopes for claiming a grounded theory. First, they noted that:

> practitioners or others may encounter somewhat different or not-quite-the-same situations, but still wish to guide their actions by it. They must discover the extent to which the theory does apply and where it has to be qualified for the new situations. (p. 15)

This did not sound much like theory. Rather, this passage sounded remarkably similar to reader generalizability. Giving theory a bit more robust flavor, Corbin and Strauss (1990) went on to suggest that "given the theoretical perspective of the original researcher and following the same general rules for data collection and analysis, plus similar conditions, another investigator should be able to arrive at the same general scheme" (p. 15). Finally, they noted that "the more systematic and widespread the theoretical sampling, the more completely the conditions and variations will be discovered, permitting greater generalizability, precision, and predictive capacity" (p. 15). But my study was not widespread and given the unique peculiarities of curriculum deliberation about a controversial Holocaust history, would I not be overreaching by claiming theoretical offerings? If my study was considered in association with similar ones in some sort of qualitative meta-analysis, perhaps theory could be generated. This was therefore the

solution to my puzzle. I did not have to hope for reader generalizability nor make theoretical assertions based on a single and extreme case study. I became aware that I was producing *grounded understandings* and these, when grouped with understandings generated within other studies, could culminate in overarching theory. In this sense, the transferability of my grounded understandings would fit within the rubric of *future generalizability*--a notion to be clarified in the following section.

2. Grounded Understandings

I must caution the reader that my doctoral committee did not call for a more appropriate expression of transferability. Many educational researchers understand that both reader generalizability and grounded theory are common, legitimate, and often rigorous goals for a qualitative rendering of external validity and quite appropriate for a dissertation. Moreover, given the scant attention given to transferability in many qualitative methodology texts and journals, committee members will probably not devote inordinate amount of time or attention to this part of a study. But personally, I found reader generalizability and grounded theory to be extremes, with one lacking a sense of ambition and confidence and the other somewhat chimerical, given my particular study.

As part of grounded understandings, I thought in terms of producing a coherent and "illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on and consistent with detailed study of that situation" (Schofield, 1990, p. 203). As noted earlier, many qualitative researchers de-emphasize the goal of transferability, but often the literature seems to assume that transferability must consist in results obtained from one context that apply to the current state of affairs in another context. Schofield (1990) suggested that alternative ways of thinking about transferability could include cases where the results obtained from one context apply to the future state of affairs in another context. In short, qualitative studies can consciously look for transferability in future trends and situations rather than the actual state of affairs, which became one objective of my study. This study may very well speak to future situations, as countries and communities continue to grapple with controversial curricula, and become "to some extent generalizable" (Schofield, 1990, p. 206). This embodies the spirit of grounded understandings.

For example, one of the findings of this study pertained to how the Ministry of Education in Latvia often, unwittingly or not, limits and inhibits new efforts to address the Holocaust in schools. Although it is not necessarily a conscious and deliberate attempt at avoidance, this centralized institution influences the structure of the school-day. Throughout the study I found that the Ministry continually altered its support and interest in the project. Part of this change was due to the inherent challenge of political consistency in a nascent democracy. But it was also partly attributable to the politicization of Holocaust history and the unwillingness of the officials to fully support Holocaust education within a Zeitgeist more attuned to Latvian history and not, as one respondent in my study suggested, the "history of others." Initially, the Ministry was fearful of Americans dictating what would be done, though they often made promises and assurances to the project that offered endorsement and support. Given the uncertainty with the ultimate form of the curriculum, governments in general often limit their

investments or focus on short-term improvements rather than long-term curricular changes (Elmore & Sykes, 1992), which was evident in this particular study. But in the main, I found the Ministry to be dislocated from individual classrooms and teachers as they predominately demonstrated their concern about the political implications of their initiatives.

This grounded understanding of the Ministry of Education fits within Schofield's (1990) conception of future generalizability. Although circumstances in Latvia are certainly unique, other societies face similar problems. Some societies experience strong restrictions on instructional time (Davies, 2000), course structures (Frankl, 2003), little obligation for Holocaust instruction (Santerini, 2003; Short, 2003) and national assessments (Brown & Davies, 1998) that serve to diminish Holocaust education opportunities by rewarding coverage and breadth of historical knowledge. Many of the teachers I interviewed cited forces related to the Ministry, including a limited number of lessons, lack of time, adherence to a set curriculum, syllabi, national examinations, national standards, gaps in teachers' knowledge, and limited materials, that serve to weaken Holocaust education in Latvia. Knowledge of these particular obstacles to curriculum reform and the discussion of controversial issues may assist future curriculum projects and educational researchers working within post-authoritarian states.

3. Lessons Learned

Advocates of grounded theory claim that universality is situated within social interaction, but as Glaser (2002) recently suggested, data do not exist "waiting to be collected" (p. 323). Rather, we generate data based on interactions with others within a specific place and time. Quite significantly, Glaser went on to underscore that we can never again generate these data, but that it is possible to create descriptions and interpretations from these data. In short, he criticizes those who are unwilling or incapable of conceptualizing from description. Yet, because grounded theory is an abstraction of the particular, it produces conceptualizations that are potentially "timeless in their applicability" (p. 319). Therefore, the schism between descriptive data and transcendental abstractions exposes a gap in the literature vis-à-vis external validity and transferability. I have found that the notion "grounded understandings" addresses this omission and provides and intermediate category. The process of arriving at grounded understandings is similar to the work of grounded theory, with the important exception of stopping short of claiming conceptualizations and theory that are dislocated from the particular. Instead, grounded understandings are tentative apprehensions of the importance or significance of phenomena, which conceptualize to the point of producing meaning and explanatory power. This process aids in producing associated understandings based on additional unique cases and contexts, but it is only embryonic and nascent, not ready to pull apart from its umbilical ties with the particular.

By the end of the dissertation I had, in some ways, returned full circle to Erickson's (1986) remarks on interpretive methods. I realized that when we really want to know "what is happening here" (p. 121) as part of making "the familiar strange," it is precisely about generative reflection based on localized meanings. The need for a "comparative

understanding of different social settings" beyond the circumstances of the local or unique setting need not be oriented toward a potential reader, but rather future researchers and curriculum writers. Grounded understandings, in this sense, are not that far removed from "concrete universals" (Erickson, 1986, p. 130) that we arrive at by "studying a specific case in great detail and then comparing it with other cases studied in equally great detail," even if those cases are yet to arise. Although my study contained unique particularities and non-recurring localized meanings, it was not necessary, as Geertz (1973) suggested, "to know everything in order to understand something" (p. 20). Even though few methods can rival ethnography for developing understandings of social life and how social attitudes are constructed (Palonsky, 1987), many times these are simply understandings that have not developed to the stage of theory. Understanding, in the sense that Dewey (1933) proposed, pertains to parts of information as grasped in their relations to each other, which comes about through reflection upon the meaning of what is studied. To the extent the meaning of phenomena and ideas depends on their relationship with other things, grounded understanding may be an apt descriptor of not only what the study produced, but what it has to offer to curriculum researchers.

4. Conclusion

This strange odyssey culminated in finding a compromise between reader generalizability and the generation of theory. Other doctoral students might find the process of arriving at this compromise and tenable solution of interest as they confront the issue of ensuring the significance, relevance, and the endurance of their work. Conducting research in unique, specific, and non-recurring settings lends itself to intrinsic or extreme examples that are seemingly isolated from other experiences and situations. Therefore, we tend to divorce ourselves from the criterion of transferability or we abstract findings to such a degree that we claim a theoretical product. The situation of Latvians breaking historical silences through curriculum has an array of connections and relations. Even if no two cultures, or individuals for that matter, make the same meaning, it does not exclude the possibility that there are overlapping and similar meanings rooted in similar experiences and ideas, even if they are situated in the future. Transferability in local, unique, and highly contextual research settings is therefore not all that chimerical, but rather an incredibly significant feature of the dissertation that need not be marginalized, nor taken lightly.

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